The Picture of Will Graham

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/3498155.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, James Gray, Clark Ingram
Additional Tags:	Oscar Wilde - Freeform, Alternate Universe - 19th Century, Victorian, Torture, Caning, Child Abuse, Foppishness, Faustian Bargain, Wendigo, Dark Will
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of Hannibal Gothic Tales
Stats:	Published: 2015-03-07 Completed: 2015-03-13 Words: 10,749 Chapters: 8/8

The Picture of Will Graham

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Summary

A Hannibal retelling of Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. Dr. Hannibal Lecter finds a young man whose anger and violent desires hide beneath a beautiful face. Will Graham confesses to him that he wishes he could remove fear, shame, regret, and the passage of time and place it elsewhere. From that moment onward, Will no longer grows old but a painting of him does. As Will explores his darkest nature, the painting becomes grotesquely affected by his actions. Part of a larger series in which classic works of Gothic literature are recast with Hannibal characters.

Notes

"We must remember that Satan has his miracles, too"--John Calvin

Chapter 1

Will Graham, study from life

James Gray, 1890

"You will never learn your place in this world, boy," the man snarled, "Until you have it beaten into you."

Little Will trembled as his trousers and drawers were lowered. He clasped his hands together and looked over his shoulder at his grandfather. He could see the self-satisfied glint in his eyes, the twitching sneer at his mouth.

"Over the back of the chair," the man ordered.

"Please," Will sniveled, tears beginning to trickle down his face. "I will be good, Grandfather. Please don't cane me."

The man grabbed the back of Will's neck and forced him over the chair. Will felt himself raise on his tiptoes, his body shaking in fright.

The sting of the cane on his buttocks and the backs of his legs brought screams out of his throat. He kicked and grasped the seat of the chair as hard as he could. The question was

repeating in in his mind, even now when he lacked the courage to squeak it any longer. It only seemed to infuriate his grandfather even more.

What did I do... what did I do.

What he had done was kill his mother coming out of her. What he had done was bear the splitting image of the man his mother had married against her own father's wishes. That man, his father, had died before he was even born.

When he had finished laying swollen red stripes all over Will's pale skin, he began to run his cold fingers over them. Will trembled even more now. Grandfather pulled him back from the chair and pushed him down to his knees in front of him. He sobbed.

Fifteen years older, Will Graham tied his ascot in front of the mirror. A carriage had driven by and the driver had cracked his whip in the air, the hissing sound bringing the sting of a cane to the forefront of his mind. His hands froze on the silk of his tie and his mouth opened slightly. Blue eyes didn't see anything in front of him, focusing on a triggered memory. He could feel the hardwood floor beneath his knees, hear the sound of the front of his grandfather's trousers opening, his hand on his face forcing his mouth open.

"There's a good boy."

Will shuddered and cringed, shaking his head. He reached out and grabbed the sides of the mirror and stared into his own reflection.

You are here now, he told himself, taking in his adult features. *You are grown. You are not there anymore.*

Calming himself, he released his grip on the mirror and returned to tying his tie.

In a studio across town, in a middle-class district, Dr. Hannibal Lecter perused the artwork of James Gray. He enjoyed the man’s portraits but sniffed disinterestedly at his landscapes. Gray had a talent for capturing the essence of the human condition. Ever the humanist, Dr. Lecter found saccharine depictions of peaceful woodland creatures and romantic visions of cliffs and sunrises to be dreadfully dull. The arrogance in a man’s leer, the exhausted bags under a woman’s eyes, the tell-tale signs of tragedy and folly and resentment that James Gray could portray with a mark of his brush; that was a thing of great fascination.

Hannibal knew people. He had much experience with them from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down on it. He was far older than his face betrayed.

He pulled at the fabric covering one large painting.

“That isn’t finished yet, Dr. Lecter,” Gray explained.

“Do you mind?” he asked with a toss of his head at the shape beneath the drapery.

“No. Have a look if you like,” Gray answered. “But be forgiving, as I’ve not added the final touches.”

Hannibal flung back the fabric and inhaled sharply. The painting was of a touchingly handsome young man. He had a fine, boyish nose, curly dark brown hair that framed his angelic face, and full lips that seemed nearly ready to part in a sigh. His steel blue eyes peered back at him as though imparting to him something of profound tenderness.

“Please tell me this man exists, and is not purely a figment of your dazzling imagination.”

“That is Mr. Will Graham,” Gray replied, approaching the painting. “I saw him in the square and I begged him to sit for me. I believe I have found my new muse.”

“Narcissus personified,” Hannibal mused, “I think it must be your best work. Please tell me something of the man.”

“He is unequal in compassion and empathy,” Gray said. “He came into wealth quite young, when his grandfather died. He uses most of it on charitable efforts. In fact, I believe he is paying a visit to a local orphanage this morning, and will be sitting again for me in an hour or so.”

“You’ve painted him to appear quite melancholy,” Hannibal pointed out. “Was that intentional?”

“He is a melancholy sort. I was curious about him, so I mentioned his name to another patron of mine, Lord Fermor. He knew of his grandfather, and wasn’t afraid to spill gossip to someone like myself. I fully understand the young man’s disposition now.”

“Some terribly, romantically tragic past no doubt,” Hannibal smirked. “The likes of which Dickens would find too saturnine to pen.”

Gray chuckled, “You jest, but it really is a sad tale.”

“Go on,” Hannibal prodded.

“Apparently, Mr. Graham’s mother married beneath her station and her father was furious. While she was still pregnant with the boy, his grandfather hired a man to kill his father in a duel. After that, Mrs. Graham died in childbirth, and Will was sent to live with his grandfather. Aside from having arranged the death of his father, Lord Fermor tells me that the grandfather was a cruel and vicious sort, a merciless disciplinarian, without an ounce of love for the boy.”

“Abused and unloved,” Hannibal murmured, tracing his finger over Will Graham’s jawline. “I find him even more beautiful now. James, you must let me meet him.”

The St. Bosco home for boys was an intimidating, colorless place. Will tried his best to smile at every child who looked his way as he passed out the books he brought them. He was glad that he chose ones with vivid illustrations.

The headmaster, a grim man named Kelso, liked to carry his cane with him wherever he strode. Seeing the white, slightly bent length of wood made Will’s ears burn. He tried to

avoid making eye contact with him, instead focusing on getting the books directly into the hands of the boys.

They were excited. Reading material for children was a luxury. One of them stood up and dashed to a bench. Kelso reached out a long arm and grabbed the boy by his hair.

“Running is not permitted!” he barked, and thrashed the cane over the back of the boy’s legs. The child cried out in pain and Will felt a tremor come over his body.

“Stop,” he said, in merely a croak, then louder, “Stop, please!”

He stumbled to his feet and approached the headmaster.

“Please, I must ask you to stop that at once!”

The headmaster released his grip on the child, who skulked away with his book still in hand and tears staining his face.

“Discipline is an important aspect of what I do here, Mr. Graham,” Kelso explained. “Many fine sorts, privileged gentlemen such as yourselves, do not understand what must go into raising the… underprivileged, so that they do not repeat the errors of their predecessors, do you see?”

Will’s hands clenched and unclenched as he stood all but frozen in front of the man.

The headmaster bowed to the grimacing face of Will Graham and added, “I will refrain from causing you any discomfort while you are here, Sir.”

When Will climbed into the carriage, his muscles aching from tension and slammed his back against the seat, his breath came out in gasps and shudders. He rubbed his hands over his face and fell into the ensuing panic attack. The gasps emerged harder and harder from his lungs until they were more like wheezing, hacking coughs with a coppery taste at the end of them.

He closed his eyes and saw himself back in that orphanage, standing in front of Mr. Kelso. He imagined holding a woodcutter’s axe in his extended arm. At the languid speed of a dream-like state, Will swung the axe forward and buried it in the side of Kelso’s neck. The blood spurted out and flecked the front of Will’s jacket, waistcoat, and the fine silk ascot tie that seemed to hold in the rage in his throat. Time sped up once more, and now he was hacking, chopping, decapitating Mr. Kelso. His gray head rolled across the floor, picking up dust-bunnies that clung to the phlegm in his open eyes.

Will shook the image away. It disgusted him, and yet he had been able to calm down. His breathing had become regular, and nothing but a soreness in his wind-pipe remained.

Chapter 2

Will was surprised to see the dapper gentleman in James Gray's studio when he arrived. He shook his hand, but looked away when Dr. Lecter's gaze remained in contact with his eyes for too long.

"You are as handsome as your portrait, Mr. Graham," Hannibal said.

"Please, call me Will."

The young man stood in his place in front of Gray's easel and smoothed the front of his tie.

"I hope you don't mind if I engage you in conversation, Will," Hannibal said, still observing him with unflinching golden eyes. "I know James buries himself deep into his work, so he can't be much of a conversationalist while you pose."

"That's quite all right," Will replied. Hannibal grinned at the vagueness of his words, not indicating whether it was all right for him to converse, or all right that Gray did not.

"Just lift your chin a little bit, please," Gray instructed, and Will obliged. "There's a good boy."

Hannibal noticed a change in Will's expression; a transitory cringe and a spark of anger in his eyes that smoothed away as soon as it came over him. Hannibal's lip curled over his teeth.

"James tells me that you participate in charity at an orphanage," he remarked, "How very altruistic of you."

Will shifted a bit and answered, "Is that not what we are here for, to improve the lives of others?"

Hannibal clucked his tongue and said, "The aim of life is self-development. To realize one's nature perfectly--that is what each of us is here for. People are afraid of themselves, nowadays."

The spark lit up in Will's eyes once more.

"I suppose people who are charitable are simply afraid of themselves?"

"They have forgotten the highest of all duties," Hannibal stated. "The duty that one owes to one's self. Of course, they are charitable. They feed the hungry and clothe the beggar. But their own souls starve, and are naked. Courage has gone out of our race."

Will's voice became harsher, less winsome.

"Perhaps we never really had it," he said. "Although, I refuse to believe that everything we do is out of fear."

“The terror of society, which is the basis of morals,” Hannibal went on, “And the terror of God, which is the secret of religion--these are the two things that govern us.”

“And which do you surmise that I fear; society or God?”

“Perhaps the seed is internal, rather than external,” Hannibal replied, moving closer to the young man, his head cocked inquisitively. “No, you, Mr. Graham, with your rose-white boyhood, have had passions that have made you afraid; thoughts that have fined you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame.”

Will could no longer stare ahead at nothing as the subject of a painting. He turned and stared at the man, visibly shaken.

“Mr. Gray,” he croaked, “Might I take a rest and sit down for a while? I did not realize until just now how tired the events of this morning have made me.”

Will settled down on the couch covered in Persian saddle-bags. Hannibal joined him, offering to pour him a cup of tea.

“Why did you say those things to me?” Will asked when Gray had left the room.

“Apologies,” Hannibal murmured, pouring him some tea despite the offer never having been answered. “I have a tendency to vocalize my initial conceptions of people with little regard to their validity.”

“They weren’t invalid,” Will replied, taking a sip.

“The events of this morning have you shaken?”

Will nodded.

“I saw a man cane a boy. I stopped it, but was too cowardly to ensure that he never did it again.”

“You did have a moment of passion, though,” Hannibal pried. “When you nearly did what you wished you could do.”

“A passing moment,” Will insisted.

“Forgive me,” Hannibal said, leaning closer, “I have heard rumors of your grandfather. I understand he was a… draconian man.”

Will tilted his head with his cup in one hand and glowered at Dr. Lecter. Hannibal didn’t seem the least bit ashamed of himself, and Will gave up the non-verbal attempts to remind him of etiquette. He placed the tea back on the table. Gray reentered the room and told Will that he could finish the painting without the aid of his posing. Will nodded and turned back to Hannibal.

“Yes, he used a cane,” he whispered.

“When you saw the man caning a boy at the orphanage,” Hannibal asked. “Did you fantasize about doing him harm?”

“I did.”

“Did that trouble you?”

“It did.”

“Why?”

Will sucked in a breath and answered, “Because it was a sin.”

Hannibal chuckled at Will’s flippant way of saying the phrase, almost mocking the notion while still essentially subscribing to it.

He replied, “It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place. In the green world we inhabit there is no sin; we make sin, manufacture it in the parts that have overgrown our basic reptile nature.”

Will sniffed, “By that reason there is no murder. We make murder. It only matters to us.”

“Precisely,” Hannibal confirmed, eyes narrowing.

Will knew too well that he contained all the elements to make murder. It was true that as he watched life in its curious crucible of pain and pleasure, he could not wear over his face a mask of glass. Nor could he keep the sulphurous fumes from troubling the brain and making his imagination turbid with monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams. He shrugged away the unpleasant thought.

“Would that I could realize my own nature perfectly,” he muttered.

“Why don’t you?”

“You said it yourself,” Will answered, “Fear. I would sell my soul to take all of my fears, my regrets, and my shame and transfer it elsewhere, away from my body; to erase from my being the passage of time and the weight of it on my shoulders.”

Will glanced up at Hannibal and thought he saw his amber-gold eyes turn momentarily maroon. Trick of the light.

Hannibal lifted his hand beside his face, palm slightly open, fingers curled in a foppish display.

“I’m sorry, sell your…?”

Will set his jaw and mumbled, “My very soul.”

Hannibal’s hand closed into a fist, snatching at the air. It was a strange motion, and Hannibal smiled broadly enough to show his teeth. Will stared at him inquisitively.

“It’s finished,” Gray announced stepping back and admiring his work. Will stood up and straightened his frock coat.

The three men gathered around the painting.

“Marvelous detail,” Hannibal praised, “And you couldn’t ask for a more charming subject.”

Will ducked his head at the compliment and said, “You are very gifted, Mr. Gray.”

Gray escorted Will to the door but Hannibal stayed back for a moment. He turned slightly toward the painting and extended his arm toward it. Then he pressed his open palm against the painted breast of Will Graham.

Chapter 3

“Master Graham, there is a gentleman by the name of Lecter here to see you.”

“Thank you, Lizzie,” Will replied. He walked into his parlor to find Dr. Lecter standing with his arm over a draped canvas that he rested on the coffee table.

“James Gray wanted you to have this,” Hannibal said.

Will took the painting and set it against the wall, unveiling it.

“That was very kind of him.”

“I suggest you have it framed,” Hannibal told him. “Let it be seen in all of its glory.”

Will didn’t respond, but left the painting where it sat. Hannibal’s eyes darted back and forth between them. He straightened and tugged at the wrists of his coat.

“I was wondering if you might accompany me this evening,” he said. “I am attending a rather exclusive party.”

Will placed his hand at the back of his neck.

“I don’t fare well at parties,” he said. “I don’t think I would be very good company.”

Hannibal gave him a warm look.

“I disagree. Anyway, this is one I think you would particularly enjoy. It’s a masked ball.”

That night, Will fidgeted with his mask in the carriage. Hannibal had given it to him, an eye-mask covered in scales of a lovely azure blue that matched the jacquard print on his waistcoat. When he climbed out, he placed his top hat on his head and let Hannibal lead him up to the opulent manor with a hand at the small of his back. A footman at the door bowed to them and opened the door.

Once inside, Will noticed that there weren’t many guests in the foyer. A couple was lounging on a couch, exchanging an opium pipe and blowing smoke rings across the walkway.

“What kind of party is this?” Will asked.

“The kind one must have attended before, or accompany one who has attended before.”

Will looked startled at Hannibal. He scowled and asked, “Why aren’t you wearing a mask?”

Hannibal smiled.

“Oh, they all know me here.”

They passed into the ballroom and Will glanced around the room at the strange guests in various disguises. They were gathering around as a lean-muscled man in a black plague doctor's mask stepped into the middle of the room. He bowed so that the thick beak dipped toward the floor. Will spotted a pair of chains hanging from the ceiling behind him. The plague doctor reached out into the crowd and pulled a man forward. He began to strip the man of his clothes and the crowd grew hushed.

Will pressed his fingers against his mask once more; as if afraid it would slip. He felt very aware of himself suddenly, even though every face in the room was turned toward the two in the center.

The plague doctor removed all of the guest's clothing and then pulled on the chains so that the shackles were brought to his outstretched wrists. He fastened them into place and then pulled the chain once more to lift the man's arms high above his head. He was stretched tightly upward, his body taut and quivering.

"Why do you assume that I am the depraved sort?" Will whispered to Hannibal.

"I do not," Hannibal responded. "I assume you are the repressed sort. I am merely being a friend in need."

The plague doctor reached for a nearby table and lifted a flogger. He ran the leather tails between his fingers. Will could feel the room become warmer.

"What impulses do you think I am repressing?" Will hissed.

"All of them," Hannibal answered. "Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us."

The flogger flew through the air and landed against the man's skin with a heavy slap. He lurched forward and cried out, bouncing up on his toes momentarily, then falling back again.

Will watched the plague doctor beat the man, slowly at first, then faster and faster until the man was screaming and twisting on his chains. Will felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight. Confusion and panic rose within him and he shook his head. When the plague doctor twirled the man around so that his angry lash marks could be seen by the other side of the crowd, he felt his cock stir. The flogging continued and each cry of the man ran into the next.

Hannibal glanced over at Will. He could see the erection stiffening in his trousers. He gazed at the young man as he chewed his lower lip and shifted uncomfortably.

"There is a certain amount of pleasure," Hannibal murmured in his ear, "In seeing another person suffer, as you have suffered."

Hannibal's eyes dropped to Will's chest, which was beginning to heave.

"Tell me what you are feeling right now," he said.

"I feel wicked," Will croaked.

Hannibal shook his head.

“That’s a moral judgment, Will. Tell me what you are feeling.”

“I am afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Everything else I am feeling.”

Hannibal grinned and moved closer to the young man. His hip was now pressed against his.

“Take that fear,” he instructed, “And transfer it somewhere else, as you mentioned before. Push it away from yourself and examine what you are.”

The man in the center of the room released a particularly anguished cry and Will couldn’t control a small groan from his own lips.

The plague doctor walked around the circle of the crowd, offering the flogger to an onlooker. Hannibal stepped forward and took it from him. He turned to face Will, and held the instrument in his flat, upturned palm.

He whispered, “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful.”

Will shook his head and quickly left the room. He stumbled out into the cool night, tearing the mask away from his face and dipping his head low between his knees. His chest was tight, his throat aching and throbbing. For a moment, he believed he may be sick, but he thought of Hannibal’s words. Take the fear, transfer it. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth, imagining the fear being siphoned away from his body. Eventually, the only sensation that was left was a warm tingling in his gut and the stiffness of his cock.

After some time, Hannibal joined him outside.

“A little too much for one evening?” he asked, removing his top hat and tucking it under his arm.

“You must think me very impressionable,” Will muttered.

Hannibal turned his eyes upward at the glittering network of stars in the velvet sky.

“I try not to associate with people who can’t be influenced,” he confessed. “I find them tedious.”

Will chuckled and looked up at the stars with Hannibal. A minute of silence passed between them.

“Did you want to hurt that man?” Hannibal finally asked.

“Not that man, specifically,” Will replied. “I wanted to hurt someone in general, I suppose.”

“Do you feel any shame?”

Will thought for a moment and his eyes widened.

“No,” he said in a lilting tone, “It’s strange. I feel quite unlike myself right now.”

The driver brought their carriage around and they climbed inside. Will rested against the back of the seat and closed his eyes.

“That man who caned the boy in front of you, what was his name?”

“Kelso,” Will mumbled.

“Kelso,” Hannibal went on. “Did you fantasize about beating him?”

“Not exactly.”

“What, then?”

“I fantasized about chopping away at him with an axe.”

Hannibal smiled at first and then began to laugh.

“Is that funny?” Will asked.

“It’s beautiful.”

Will observed Hannibal in his periphery. The man was staring back at him in wonder. His eyes were moving over his face as if drinking him in.

“You are a magnificent creature,” he finally said.

Will smirked and shook his head.

“I mean that, sincerely,” Hannibal continued. “Your youth is boundless, your beauty, unequaled.”

“I take to flattery even worse than I take to parties,” Will responded, his head lolling against the back of the seat cushion with the bumping of the carriage.

Hannibal stroked his hand against the young man’s cheek. He dragged his fingers down his throat, over his waistcoat, until they fell over the bulge at his groin. He massaged him, watching the movements of his lovely features. Will shifted and licked his lips, rocking his hips into the movements.

Hannibal set his hat beside him then leaned forward and lowered his face onto Will’s lap. Will put a hand on the back of the doctor’s head and began to run his fingers through his hair. He sighed and bit his lip, jutting his chin out as he lifted a bit from the seat.

When Hannibal opened the front of Will's trousers, he clutched the man's hair tighter and guided his head into place. A soft moan emitted from his throat when he felt Hannibal's warm mouth wrap around him and begin to suck. Will dropped his head against the window of the carriage and watched the stars once more as he slipped into a peaceful bliss.

Chapter 4

As the two continued to meet, Will appreciated the fondness that was growing between them. He found himself looking forward to their conversations and listening more intently to the strangely amoralistic philosophy the doctor espoused. At Hannibal's behest, Will decided to frame the portrait of himself above the mantelpiece in his parlor.

"When you invited me to dinner last week," Will pointed out as he entered Hannibal's drawing room one night, "I expected there would be other guests aside from myself."

Hannibal took his hat for him and hung it up.

"Where is your footman?" Will asked.

"I have given all of my servants the evening off," Hannibal replied.

Will sniffed and grinned nervously. It brought forth dimples around his mouth and Hannibal gave the young man's cheek a little nudge.

"What godless affair do you have in mind tonight, Doctor?"

"Do I appear godless to you?"

"If you do believe in god, you certainly don't kowtow to him."

Hannibal answered, "I sometimes think that god, in creating man, somewhat overestimated his ability."

Will chuckled and said, "That was certainly the case when he created you."

Hannibal flashed him a wicked grin that seemed to stretch to the corners of his glinting eyes.

"At any rate," Will continued, "I am glad that we can have dinner alone. The greatest discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others."

"Then I apologize," Hannibal answered. "There is another guest who will be joining us this evening. He is in the dining room, and has already had a few drinks."

Will furrowed his brow and followed Lecter into the room. Inside, a frumpy man hunched over the table, an empty glass of wine at his fingertips. Will crossed in front of him and stopped short when he recognized the man. It was Mr. Kelso.

"Mr. Kelso, I believe you have already met Will Graham," Hannibal introduced them.

"Of course, Mr. Graham," Kelso slurred. He wobbled a bit when he straightened and looked back at them. His eyes seemed to struggle to maintain focus.

"What is the meaning of this?" Will hissed to Hannibal as the doctor pulled out his seat.

“Please, Will, sit down.”

Will begrudgingly obeyed.

Hannibal unbuttoned his frock coat and sat as well, offering Will a glass of wine.

“We were just speaking together, before you arrived,” Hannibal told Will, “About the orphanage where Mr. Kelso spends his gracious time.”

Will twitched and glowered at Kelso. The headmaster seemed unable to hold his head steady. He blinked and rubbed his nose on the back of his hand.

“I do my part,” he muttered.

“I asked you to bring something with you this evening, to which you kindly agreed,” Hannibal said. “Would you show it to us?”

Kelso leaned to the side and dropped like a stone. He fumbled on the floor for a moment then brought up his white, slender cane which he unceremoniously slapped on the table.

Will felt heat spreading over his cheeks and ears. He turned his glare toward Dr. Lecter.

“Terribly awkward this party has become,” Hannibal went on in a posh tone. “I do believe I sense some animosity between my two guests.”

“Animosity?” Kelso mumbled, staring at his empty glass. Hannibal took the carafe and filled it to the top once more.

“Mr. Graham takes some issue with the manner in which you discipline your charges.”

Kelso responded, “It is a necessity. These boys come to me, bastards and products of poor breeding. I set them right.”

Will gritted his teeth and began to huff.

“Now, Mr. Kelso, don’t be rude,” Hannibal scolded. “Think of the company you are in. Our Mr. Graham here, his mother eloped with a soldier of no particular breeding stock. Look at the fine upstanding gentleman he has become.”

Kelso scoffed and stated, “Then I imagine someone took the cane to him enough times.”

Will suddenly pushed his chair back and planted both palms on the table.

“Dr. Lecter,” he growled. “I believed we were friends.”

Hannibal’s face grew somber.

“We are, dear lad,” he murmured. “I declare that I must be your truest friend.”

“Why are you provoking me?” Will asked. “Are you testing me for weakness?”

Hannibal clucked his tongue and said, “Do you really think that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.”

Kelso’s face lowered as he glanced back and forth between Lecter and Graham.

“I daresay I haven’t the faintest idea what either of you are talking about.”

Hannibal gave Kelso a disapproving tilt of his head and stated, “Mr. Kelso, if you can’t keep up with the conversation, best not try to join in at all.”

“I can’t,” Will breathed, pain in his voice. “You were right. My impulses are poisoning me.”

Hannibal leaned forward and put his hand on Will’s.

“There are poisons so subtle that to know their properties one has to sicken of them. There are maladies so strange that one has to pass through them if one seeks to understand their nature. And, yet, what a great reward one receives when the effects are revealed. How wonderful the whole world can become.”

Will shook his head, tossing the dark brown curls that framed his face. His pretty features were contorted in anger.

“What would you have me do?”

“When you spoke to me after we first met, you denounced yourself as a coward for not acting as you saw fit. I encourage you now, to do as you see fit.”

“I do not feel well at all,” Kelso belched. “I really must be going.”

He stood up, but stumbled over his feet and fell to his knees. He held his head and groaned.

“What have you been giving me to drink?”

Hannibal rose, and Will followed. The doctor came up behind Kelso and began to pull off his coat and then ripped his shirt away from his body, sending the buttons scattering across the floor. Kelso tried to bat at him, but landed heavily on his hands.

“What are you doing?”

Will crossed to the other side of the table and took the cane in his hand. He slid his fingers over the smooth, curving wood.

“Allow me to take your coat,” Hannibal offered, and removed Will’s frock coat. He draped it over the back of the chair and went to sit down.

Kelso began to crawl toward the door of the dining room, and Will blocked his path.

“You were given charge over vulnerable children,” he spat down on him. “But you abuse them. Do not wax pious about your concern for their welfare. You are a sadist!”

“Sadist, what?” Kelso garbled. “It is not as if I enjoy it, sir, I am only doing what is best…”

“Liar!” Will screamed and flung his arm behind his head. He brought the cane down with a sensational crack upon Kelso’s back. The man screamed and fell away, attempting to scoot in the opposite direction.

Will came after him with a pitiless rage. His white teeth bared, his steel blue eyes piercing the air between them. He lashed with the cane upon any surface Kelso presented as the desperate headmaster flailed and rolled on the floor.

“Please! Stop!” Kelso begged, putting his hands up in supplication.

Will did not stop. He whipped him again and again until the thin, long cane broke skin and red stained the white wood. Kelso’s blood flew upward in a mist, spotting Will’s white shirt and waistcoat. He could taste it on his lips. The crack of the cane on firm skin softened to a wet slapping sound and Kelso rolled into a ball on the floor, unable to do anything but sob and shudder.

The cane fell from Will’s hand onto the floor; its length bent even more and soaked in blood. He looked up at Hannibal, who was sitting in his chair, leg crossed over the other, holding his wine glass aloft. An amused smirk was planted on his face.

Will sighed loudly and cast a glance down at Mr. Kelso.

“And now I will have to face the consequences of my actions,” he mourned. “You didn’t mention that when you were pressing me on.”

“No, you will not,” Hannibal assured him. “Go home, Will, and rest. I will worry about the hapless Mr. Kelso.”

Will felt tired, sore from flinging the cane, but in place of the gnawing feelings of impotent rage he felt vindicated. He felt righteous. When he entered his own parlor, he glanced at the painting by James Gray that hung above his mantelpiece. It looked different to him. He approached it and squinted at the depiction of his own face. He wondered if Gray must have touched it up a bit before sending it over, and Will hadn’t noticed.

There was a tiny hint of a sneer there. His mouth seemed slightly parted, his lip curling upward on one side. Then Will recoiled a bit when he noticed something buried in the curls around his head. Will reached out and pulled the painting down from the mantel. He peered at it to find small bumps emerging from each side of his scalp. They were brown, velvety protrusions that had broken through the skin and were barely visible against his dark hair.

Like the budding antlers of an adolescent deer.

Chapter 5

While the guests mingled over the spectacular array of hors d'oeuvre at Dr. Lecter's charity banquet, Will Graham remained in the drawing room. Hannibal noticed his absence and excused himself from the chit-chat to go find him. The young man stood beside the fireplace, staring into the flames with glassy eyes.

"Do you have plans to be sociable this evening?" Hannibal asked. He had brought Will a glass of champagne.

"It feels as though I am dancing on a man's grave," Will muttered, accepting the glass.

"I am not asking you to dance," the doctor replied, "But his was not a life worth mourning."

"When you said that you would take care of Mr. Kelso, I didn't realize that you meant to kill him."

"Think of this, Will," Hannibal told him. "Even if he had been persuaded not to press charges against you for assaulting him, he still would be the headmaster at St. Bosco's. He would still be bringing terror and misery into the lives of those children."

Will nodded, but still couldn't look Hannibal in the eyes.

Kelso had "disappeared" according to the police, along with a copious amount of funds from the orphanage coffers. Hannibal stepped in to replace the money lost, and then some. In return, the council agreed to allow him to personally oversee the hiring of a new headmaster.

"Do you feel remorse over your part in it?" he asked.

"I can't place how I feel," Will replied. "In my mind, I know that I should be ashamed."

"But you are not," Hannibal finished for him.

"I feel… a quiet sense of power."

Hannibal sniffed and his lip twitched as he thought.

"When you were beating Kelso," he mused, "You accused him of being a sadist. That is, one who is sexually aroused by the suffering of others. Why did you assume that about him?"

"In my experience, men who beat little boys have a lecherous intent."

"You are speaking of your grandfather."

Will shifted and placed his glass on the mantelpiece above the fire. He stared at his fingers as he ran them over the marble.

“When James Gray called you ‘good boy,’” Hannibal pressed, “I saw a look in your eyes: resentment, anger. I do not think it was directed at the man in the room.”

“It triggered a memory,” Will whispered.

“A memory in which you felt powerless?”

“Yes,” Will’s voice was barely audible now.

Hannibal reached out and clasped his hand around Will’s neck.

“You are powerful now, Will,” he murmured to him. “The moment I met you I saw that you were quite unconscious of what you really are, of what you really might be. There was so much in you that charmed me that I felt I must tell you something about yourself. I thought how tragic it would be if you were wasted.”

Will finally locked eyes with Hannibal. The man had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. He rocked forward and kissed him hard, panting and clutching at the man’s collar. Hannibal moved into the kiss, still holding him by the neck as he led him toward the desk. The young man uttered an aggressive groan and maneuvered so that he was now leading, bumping him up against the desk until Hannibal was sitting on the edge of it. He pushed between his legs and began to rub his groin against Hannibal’s. He kissed him feverishly, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth and biting until the man moaned in reply.

“Where is our host?” a voice came from the foyer.

Will stepped back and looked at the doorway. He touched his fingers to his mouth when he realized he tasted blood. He shot a glance back at Hannibal, who was still perched on the edge of the desk, blotting at his split lip with a handkerchief.

“Forgive me, I…” Will began.

Hannibal waved the sentiment away with a winning smile and pushed the spotted handkerchief back into his pocket. He stood up and said, “It is vulgar to me that one so beautiful should ever ask forgiveness.”

The two advanced into the dining room and the guests were seated and served. Hannibal stood at the head and raised his glass.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “Thank you very much for attending this evening. Tonight we raise money for the St. Bosco’s Home for Boys. Please enjoy your dinner, but keep in mind that there are those less fortunate who are in great need of your charitable donations.”

“Here, here!” the guests murmured and toasted.

Hannibal continued, “The former headmaster was not a man who should be given charge over young lives. If one positive thing might be said about him, it’s that he had the good sense to abdicate his position. Let us hope the new one will use his authority for the benefit

of the children. Now, I believe my co-host, Mr. Will Graham, has a few words he would like to say."

Will stood up slowly, holding his glass as he tried to keep his hand steady.

He paused for a moment, cleared his throat and said, "I am an orphan, myself. That experience has shown me that a cruel act… or a kind hand… can make all of the difference in the world. The children of London deserve to be shown the best that humanity has to offer. It is our duty to give that to them. No longer should we allow brutality and corruption to hold sway over the well-being of those most vulnerable and innocent."

He looked down at the table and then added, "Thank you."

"To the children of London!" Hannibal toasted.

"The children of London!" the guests replied, and drank to those words.

Chapter 6

“Only you could persuade me to go to the theatre,” Will jested as they entered the crowded vestibule.

Men and women in fine attire bumped past them on the staircase to the balcony.

“An acquaintance of mine is performing tonight,” Hannibal explained. “I would very much like for you to meet him.”

The two of them took a seat in the balcony and the orchestra began to play. When the curtains rose, an actor took the stage and delivered a monologue.

“That is the man,” Hannibal whispered to Will. “Clark Ingram.”

Will nodded and studied Ingram. He had a simple handsomeness to him, but an affectatious way of speaking that Will found strangely unpleasant.

At the intermission, Hannibal and Will stayed on the balcony as other audience members scooted by.

“How are you enjoying the play?” Hannibal asked.

“Very much,” Will answered. “How did you come to be friends with Mr. Ingram?”

“He is not my friend,” Hannibal corrected, sucking air between his teeth in disdain.

“Then why do you wish for me to meet him?”

Hannibal leaned forward until his arms were resting on the edge of the balcony.

“Mr. Ingram,” he began, “is a vile, self-entitled little worm.”

Will’s eyes widened and he leaned forward as well, drawing close to Hannibal. The doctor pointed at the closed curtains, behind which Ingram was most likely readying himself for his next cue.

“He had in his employ a young scullery maid,” Hannibal continued. “He forced himself upon her, Will. She had no way of defending herself or retaliating against him, and so he faced no consequences.”

Will’s face grew pale. He swallowed as a sick feeling rose in his throat.

“She became pregnant. Having nowhere left to turn, she took her own life. The worst thing to happen to Mr. Ingram is that he was forced to hire a new maid.”

Will slumped back into his chair. His mouth was still open in stunned silence when the curtains rose and the second act began.

As Ingram performed, Will felt his loathing for the man grow more and more intense. Every action, every gesture he made seemed repulsive to him. By the time the play had ended, Will's eyes were stormy and his jaw aching with tension.

"Come," Hannibal coaxed, lifting up on his arm.

Will followed Hannibal backstage, where Ingram was about to pour himself a drink.

"Mr. Ingram," Hannibal called out, "Riveting performance. I must insist that you put that swill down and join us for a drink instead."

Ingram looked at them in surprise, and then a broad smile spread over his face.

"Much obliged, gentlemen!" he replied.

In the carriage, Hannibal passed around a bottle of Scotch. By the time they arrived at the Lecter estate, Ingram was quite sloshed. He was laughing and telling stories about the other actors he worked with and the ladies he had wooed. Will tried to refrain from glaring at him and displayed a gritted smile, forcing a harsh laugh from his lungs.

"I have heard stories about you," Hannibal said in a mock scold, wagging his finger at the man. His cheeks were pink and he appeared quite jovial. "Something about a scullery maid?"

Ingram flopped back on the seat dramatically.

"Oh god, not that business," he groaned. "Thank the maker she's gone now. I can't tell you what a relief…!"

Will clenched his fists and felt every breath like sandpaper in his throat. They climbed out of the carriage and Hannibal took them through the back door, into the kitchen.

"I must get for you…" Hannibal stated with a little dance-step flourish, "The most exquisite brandy. Wait right here."

He stepped into the pantry, and came out instead with a length of rope. Ingram was turned to Will and leaned against him for support while he announced his love for all things inebriating. Will's eyes flashed and a sly smirk twitched at the corner of his mouth as Hannibal stepped quietly behind him and wrapped the rope around his body.

"What in the hell?" Ingram stammered, and he attempted to wriggle away to no success.

Will grabbed onto him while Hannibal finished tying. Then Hannibal pushed him hard so that he stumbled backwards and fell to the floor with a thud.

"Get this off of me!" he cried.

Hannibal lifted himself up on the counter and kicked his legs a bit while he plucked an orange from a bowl and began to peel. Will stared at him for a moment, and then glanced over at a broom leaning against the wall. He fetched it and loomed over Clark Ingram.

“You think you have the right to use people,” he growled, “Because they are in no position to refuse?”

“Who are you people?” Ingram gasped, trying to sit up.

“You think you can rape and abuse!” Will screamed, bringing the broom handle down on his knee and splitting it into two.

A stunned look came over Ingram’s face, but it faded into a smug grimace.

“You can’t keep me here. This is unlawful.”

Will fell on top of him and ripped open Ingram’s trousers, pulling them and his drawers down.

“Stop! What do you think you are doing?”

Will pinned his knee down on Ingram’s back and gripped one end of the broom handle. He jammed it between his legs and into his ass. Ingram shrieked and flopped his legs on the floor.

“No, oh god, please… don’t!”

Will gritted his teeth and pushed it further inside of him as the man sobbed and tried desperately to pull away.

“How does it feel to be violated, Mr. Ingram?” Will snarled. He pushed the broom handle in further and further until blood trickled between the screaming man’s legs.

Will stood up and shot a glance at Hannibal. He was eating the orange and tossing his head, a fascinated expression on his face. Will picked up the other end of the broom handle.

“Please…” Ingram wailed, rolling to his side. “Please, take it out of me.”

Will kicked him onto his back and Ingram howled in agony. He knelt down once more, with his knees pressed into the man’s chest.

“No, no!” Ingram pleaded.

Will forced the handle of the broom between his teeth and began thrusting it into his mouth and down his throat. The garbled, choking screams of Clark Ingram grew muffled as the handle pushed inward, blocking his esophagus. Will stood up and watched as the man suffocated. He grew still, his eyes open like a dead fish. He looked thoroughly impaled, broomstick jutting out of both ends.

Rage settling, Will felt a sudden panic. He stepped away and pressed the back of his hand against his mouth.

“Ssh…” Hannibal soothed. “Think of how much better the world is, now.”

“I’ve lost myself again,” Will gasped.

“I disagree,” Hannibal said, hopping down from the counter. “It appears you’ve found yourself again.”

Will shook his head.

“Do you feel that sense of power once more?” Hannibal asked.

Will caught his breath and looked into Hannibal’s eyes. He bit his lip and then nodded.

Hannibal put his hand on Will’s shoulder and said, “We can have in life but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible.”

Will gazed down at his newest victim.

“Even when one has been wounded by it?”

“Especially then,” Hannibal remarked.

Will returned to his own home and threw his coat over the lounge in the parlor. When he glanced up at the painting over the mantel he cried out.

His painted face had turned somewhat gray-tinted. His mouth was open in a toothy grin, and the antlers had grown out and sprouted prongs. Will rushed to the painting and pulled it off the wall. He ran to the closet in his room, threw it inside, and locked the door.

When Hannibal called on Will next, the housekeeper told him that the young man was on holiday. It wasn’t until weeks later, when the house was locked with white sheets thrown over the furniture, that Hannibal realized he was truly gone.

Chapter 7

Time was but a trivial plaything to Hannibal, like a pretty fob watch that no longer wound up, hanging from its golden chain as a mere bauble. Years passed and fashions changed. Hannibal was never one to be a spectator, and he always dressed for the occasion. Men started wearing dickey shirts, which he found barely tolerable, and women put flowers in their hats and revealed their ankles. Loud, jostling automobiles began to replace the musky, shivering flesh of horses leading carriages.

The true effect of time, however, was lost on someone fundamentally disconnected from the concept. Very few people touched Hannibal's life, and darted into and out of his vision like actors from behind a curtain. It did not matter what area the curtain concealed, it was the stage that held his attention. It wasn't common at all for him to beseech the performer to climb down into the auditorium and meet him face to face in the aisles.

In fact, he had only really done that once. A foolish whim, a flight of fancy, a nagging hunger he felt very unexpectedly rise in him as though all of the sensations long dead in his body were reactivated and he was suddenly reminded that he was in his own way flesh and blood. Occasionally now, a fleeting notion would pass over him, as though he had forgotten something of profound importance. As though he had lost something very precious to him and he couldn't find a way to look for it. Subconsciously, he mingled the acceptance of man's transitory nature with a glimmering hope that he could, in fact, regain what he had lost. He chose not to think of it often.

It was quite against his will that he thought about it that day. The doctor was called to examine a corpse that had been pulled from the river. When he saw the dead man's face, he recognized it though it was altered by wrinkles, rough white whiskers, and age spots on the skin. It was James Gray. Hannibal sighed. As people go, James Gray was one he rather enjoyed in his moment on stage. He had a talent for displaying other people instead of himself.

The artist had been stabbed in the chest and rolled into the river. It was a pity, but Hannibal could see from the wear on his face that Gray didn't have much longer in this world anyway. He thought of the last painting he saw Gray create, which led to thinking of its subject, and closed his eyes for a moment while nostalgia swelled and then passed. It was a sentimental emotion, but one that he maintained in lieu of its hideous cousin, regret.

He left James Gray to the attention of the police. The cause of death was exsanguination, possibly a mugging. It was a banal way for a genius to die, but there was a certain amount of poetry in thwarting the expectations of Romanticism. Perhaps Gray, a champion of the Realist movement, would find it apt.

The house that Hannibal frequented before no longer hosted those debauched parties, but there were others that sprang up in its place. Hannibal followed his nose to another where people could revel in the wanton pleasures of controlled pain. The guests still wore masks on their faces, while Hannibal chose not to.

When he entered the ballroom, several guests were engaged in sadomasochistic revelry. His eyes passed over exposed breasts, gleaming muscles and rolls of fat, freckles and hair and various shades of pink on pale. As he watched but did not partake, he felt the prickling sensation of eyes watching him from across the room. He turned to face their owner.

Lounging on a couch, surrounded by devoted intoxicated, was a heavily-masked youth. When he saw that Hannibal had returned his gaze, he stood with languid ease of movement. The young man's torso was bare; his lithe frame the Hellenistic ideal. His trousers hung low on his hips, the sumptuous curve of his pelvic muscle leading the eye downward. When he walked toward him, he swaggered with sharp shoulder-blades rocking and lean arms moving fluidly at his sides.

The mask he wore was black onyx and covered his entire face. Delicately carved antlers rose from the temples. He looked the part of a mythical entity, a prince of the sacred hunt. Hannibal felt a pleased smile tickle the corners of his lips. His breath deepened when the prince reached out and took him by the hand.

He led Hannibal to a wooden padded "horse" and began to undress him, fingers working over the fine buttons and slipping between fabric and skin. Hannibal allowed him to strip him down as he watched the leisurely movements of the beautiful youthful form and the gleaming of the smooth onyx antlers in the dim light. The masked man moved him into position, bending Hannibal's naked body over the horse and strapping him into place with leather belts. Hannibal laid his head on the cushion and gazed upward at the divine creature. The man loomed over him, and pushed the mask up. A broad smile erupted over Hannibal's face when he looked back at Will Graham.

"Will," Hannibal exhaled, "As stunning as ever."

His hair had been shortened to the style of the time, flouncy curls framing his charming features. He studied the man he had tied down. He touched his face, another not ravaged by time. A cloud of thoughts seemed to thunder behind his steel blue irises.

"I wonder if you can feel pain," Will whispered.

He lowered his mask and took hold of a flogger. He drew his hands over the taut skin on Hannibal's back. He dug his fingers into his flesh and muscles as if testing their organic nature.

Hannibal could feel pain. Why eliminate such a vital component to experiencing pleasure? And Hannibal could feel, and always insisted on pleasure. As time flew by over his existence, the faces of men were blurred but the highlights of individual moments in pain and pleasure could be connected together like brilliant constellations. When he cried out as the tails of the flogger struck his skin, it was sincerity that could only be achieved through immediately present, gloriously carnal pain.

Behind his carved mask, Will's eyes livened as liquid quicksilver, narrowed and flickering as he saw Hannibal's flesh twitch and shudder. He felt his lungs pull and push to the exhilarating sounds that he was drawing out of the man with his own arms and hands.

When the flogging ceased, Hannibal's back was covered in sanguine hash-marks, blood and swelling fluid rising to pull the skin tight and shiny, breaking open here and there in slivered lacerations. He gasped and watched his tormentor step back with an elegant drift and a sway of his hips. His antlers tilted to amplify the curious cocking of his head. Again, after all these years, Hannibal was stricken with the realization that he had found something truly beautiful.

Will moved behind Hannibal and unbuttoned his trousers, flapping open the fly and removing his cock. The crowd murmured and began to gather. They looked on in gasping, sweating titillation as the young god in the onyx cervitaur mask pushed himself inside of the bound man and rocked his hips in fluid rhythm. He gripped Hannibal's thighs and thrust into him, his broad antlers offsetting the lissome frame of his shoulders and torso. His open trousers slid down to bare the cleft of his ass and the carved angles of his hipbones.

Hannibal moaned and felt waves of sensation flood his body: the stripes on his back burning, his nerve endings firing, his erection pressing firm into the cushion. Yes, Hannibal could feel, and Will delighted in discovering that. Hannibal delighted in proving it to him.

Will leaned forward and grasped the sides of the wooden horse. His thrusts became rapid and Hannibal's grunts and moans emitted from his throat in short, heavy bursts. The onlookers pushed their fingers into their half-open garments, over their breasts heaving with arousal, into the wetness between their legs or around stiff cocks. They did not turn upon each other in their excitement, at the risk of tearing their eyes away from the exotic cervitaur taking his handsome victim.

Will growled and the lean muscles of his belly shivered under a fine mist of sweat. He fell harder onto his hands and into the spasms of release. An awestruck sigh escaped Hannibal's throat and he looked back at the young man whose exquisite features hid behind the black jewel.

Will unbuckled his straps and helped Hannibal up. As he dressed, their audience clapped and voiced their approval. As they left the house, people put their hands out to them and let gentle fingers graze their bodies as they passed by. When age touched these people at last, as it does all mortals, and they found their genitals unresponsive and flaccid and their bodies stiffened with rheumatism, they would remember with aching need the scene they witnessed that night.

Chapter 8

The two entered Will's former home, still haunted by ghostly linens draped over the furniture.

"You've returned," Hannibal said. He surprised himself with the emotion in his own voice. The fluttering in his chest was a curious thing, indeed. He felt as though he had recovered a priceless heirloom and mused at how eager his fingers seemed to grasp involuntarily at Will in an effort to keep him near.

"I've wandered great distances," Will explained, "And never found the answer to my questions. I thought perhaps I would do better to search near the source."

"Were you looking for me?"

"Eventually," Will replied. "I really was quite fond of you, even when I ran away."

Hannibal beamed and said, "Of course you were fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you have never had the courage to commit."

"I've committed them all now," Will muttered.

He led him to the room where he had placed James Gray's painting. Hannibal stared at it in wonder. The creature depicted within bore the features of Will Graham's face, but the skin was nearly black and his mouth was open in a wide, white-toothed roar. His antlers towered over his head and his face was spattered with blood.

"It changes while I remain unchanged," Will said. "At first I was looking for James Gray. I thought that he might be the reason for my curse, as he was the one who created this painting. I realized, when I returned to find the painting even more grotesque, that I had killed an innocent man."

Hannibal admired the portrait and Will continued, "Throughout my travels, I have done loathsome things. I have tested the boundaries of my capacity to feel pleasure and agony. I have borne screams like a sculptor bears dust from the beaten stone. I look upon this painting now, and I see that it is verily the image of my own soul."

"It is beautiful," Hannibal murmured.

"Now that I have looked upon your face, and seen that you too have not aged, I know that this was your doing."

Hannibal nodded, reaching out and touching the canvas.

"You have poisoned me," Will continued, "With a painting."

"I have shown you enlightenment," Hannibal insisted. "As for being poisoned by a painting, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It is superbly sterile. The art

that the world calls immoral is art that shows the world its own shame. I look forward to the day when you can look upon this painting and see yourself, and feel no shame in it."

Hannibal turned to him and placed his hand on Will's neck.

"I have been alone for a very long time," he whispered. "I saw in you an ideal companion: someone who could walk this ancient world with me, and share in the joy of timelessness."

"What are you?"

"I am merely one who wishes to sit on the mountains where the gods assemble," Hannibal moved closer, pressing his chest against Will's and speaking softly into his ear, "Will you come and sit with me?"

Will pulled away and stared at the painting.

"You are right," he said, "This painting is but a mirror. Perhaps I didn't need you to show me the nature of my soul. We are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell."

"Must it be hellish?" Hannibal asked. "We can make this mortal plane our own heaven, you and I."

Will's eyes grew wet as he looked back at Hannibal.

"I do not show myself to many," Hannibal went on. "I don't bestow immortality and the promise of friendship to anyone. I have given you a rare gift. Pray, tell me that you want it."

"What I want," Will answered, his voice low and creaking, "Is to kill this monstrous soul-life, and its hideous warnings, and to be at peace."

Hannibal moved to kiss Will's lips, but he saw that the young man had brought out a shining curved knife. He smirked.

"You can't kill me, Will," he told him.

"I don't intend to," Will replied, his eyes darting over Hannibal's. A look of pain graced his expression and Hannibal narrowed his eyes inquisitively.

Suddenly, Will turned to face the painting and plunged the blade into its breast. He cried out in pain and fell backward. Hannibal clutched him, his eyes wide, cradling him in his arms as Will's face began to slowly age and a wound opened up in his own chest.

"What have you done, my beautiful boy?" Hannibal called out.

"Atonement," Will croaked.

"You have nothing for which to atone!" Hannibal wailed. He embraced him as tears began to fall down his cheeks. "What have you shown but honesty in the face of your God-given urges?"

Will gazed up at the man who held him and a thoughtful expression came over him as he said, “I wonder if, in the great body of humankind, in the minds of men set on civilization, the vicious urges we control in ourselves and the dark instinctive knowledge of those urges function like the crippled virus the body arms against.”

Hannibal pressed his hand against the wound in Will’s chest and watched his dark curls turn gray.

“Perhaps old, awful urges are the virus that makes vaccine,” Will said with a smile. “I was never meant to give in to any of this, but to emerge a stronger, healthier organism.”

“You can’t emerge as anything,” Hannibal cried, “You are dying, my love.”

“You of all people,” Will responded with a cough, “Should appreciate the possibility of an after-life.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Hannibal said, and he felt that awful sense of regret that he had so long managed to stifle within himself. “I shall never go there. I shall never see you again.”

Understanding passed between their eyes and Will took Hannibal’s hand and gave it a kiss. Then, as the beauty faded from his face into the visage of an old man, he rolled his head back and died.

Hannibal wiped the tears from his cheeks and looked up at the painting. It was once again the image of Will Graham, when he had met him so many years ago for the first time. In that moment, he felt a blazing agony that was beyond what any man could ever deem pleasurable. He gritted his teeth and emitted a strangled moan.

How interesting, he thought to himself through the seizing of his heart and the heated fury behind his eyes. *To have this put upon me, by a mortal.*

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